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An interview with Mrs. Harriet Eliel, who held many positions in the League of Women Voters at the local, state, and national levels. The interview, conducted by Carol Farley, took place at Channing House, 850 Webster in Palo Alto, in Mrs. Eliel's ninth floor suite, at 10:30 in the morning, January 22, 1973.

League Career of Mrs. Paul Eliel - (Corrected)

Except where noted, all activities relate to San Francisco

1924	Program Committee
1925	Legislative Committee
1927	2nd V.P., Legislative Committee
1928	Legislative Committee
1929	2nd V.P., Legislative Committee
1930	1st V.P., Legislative Committee
1931-33	Legislative Committee
1933-34 ⁷	President of State League
1935-36	Legislative Committee
193 8 ⁶⁻⁴¹ -39	Secretary of National League
1940	Chairman of Expansion Campaign
1942-44	President of San Francisco League
1944	1st V.P., Chairman of City Government Committee
1945	Chairman of City Government Committee
1946	Secretary of Mayor's Post-war Planning Commission

Elie: My father died when I was a year and a half old [1892] and my mother and I went to live with my grandparents in Evanston, Illinois. We spent the winters in Pasadena. When I was six, my mother remarried a bacteriologist who proceeded to get his medical degree wherever he could get a teaching job in his profession. So for the next four years we moved from Madison, Wisconsin, to Ann Arbor, Michigan, to Evanston, Illinois, and then back to California. I attended school in Pasadena at the Throop Polytechnic Institute, which later became the California Institute of Technology. I went to the University of California where I recieved a B.A. [1913] , and later in the twenties my M.A. I went back for my M.A. after the birth of my two sons [1914, 1916] , because I was interested in education and wanted to help my children in their interests. During the early twenties [1921-24] I established the John Dewey School in Berkeley for my two boys. I carried that on as an experimental school in education until the public school system opened the Whittier Elementary School as a liberal experimental school with the hope that our work would be continued in that environment. During the time when I was running the school, Mrs. Jesse Steinhart [-] of the San Francisco Center visited the school to ask me if I would become chairman of a San Francisco study group made up of members of the American Association of University Women and the San Francisco Center. This group was to study the educational administration in San Francisco and, I think, also state requirements in the field of education. I accepted that chairmanship but in order to do so I had to join one of the

two organizations. Not knowing of either organization up to that time, I just said, "Well, I guess I'll be a League of Women Voters member." And that's how I casually became (laughter) interested in the League. From that time on I was very active in the legislative field, particularly during the twenties and thirties.

Farley: Can you tell us something about what the League was like in your early years?

Eliel: The State League had just come into existence, when I first joined the League, and was feeling its way. The San Francisco Center had had a long and successful career and became the backbone of the State League during the early years. The offices were in what was then the City Club which has now been torn down for the St. Francis Hotel. Alice Burr [-1968] was the state president, and we had a budget of something like eight hundred dollars a year (laughter) and volunteer secretaries, as I remember it. Nothing had been developed in the way of trying to reach consensus on action among the California Leagues. As a matter of fact, there were only eight Leagues at that time, and we could easily reach them by phone if we had any questions. We were struggling with finance and program and trying to decide how to function.

Farley: How did this affect the power of the individual members? Since the organization was small in size, each member must have had considerably more weight.

Eliel: We didn't have any weight publicly at that time because the League wasn't well enough known. You see, it was a new organization nationally [founded 1920]. The Center had existed for some time [founded 1911] and had its own program, but the State League had not, and my first efforts were with the State League as legislative chairman.

Farley: I think you were involved in the opposition to the Breed Bill, state legislation which would give less emphasis to education. Could you tell us something about that?

Eliel: Senator Arthur H. Breed, Jr. [1903-] of Oakland was a great advocate of automobile transportation and the development of highways. He introduced an amendment to the Constitution which, if passed, would have abolished the provision that education had the first demand on the state's General Fund. The League violently opposed this, as did the Parent Teacher Association and others interested in the educational field. At the time that it was considered by the legislature, the Senate and the Assembly met jointly in the Assembly chamber. I can remember distinctly being scared to death but getting up and making a speech to the assembled legislators, telling them that the League stood for first educating children rather than building highways, and that we felt it was absolutely necessary that education be the first demand on the State Treasury. I received a standing ovation, and when I left the Assembly, Assemblyman Joseph

Feigenbaum [1900-], who then represented the San Francisco--
I think it was the twenty-first district [member California
legislature 1927-1935]--came up and threw his arms around me (laugh-
ter), which was a delightful surprise.

Farley: And your measure carried?

Eliel: Yes, the Amendment did not pass the legislature.

Farley: At this time, I think, California was vying for federal support of
the schools and was variously involved in a lot of federal programs
of the New Deal. Could you tell us something about the role the
League played in relation to the New Deal?

Eliel: When Roosevelt was elected and the New Deal began to take shape,
there were all kinds of social welfare measures introduced and
various industrial codes were being formulated. There was great
excitement throughout the nation over the new programs. The League,
because of the involvement of federal funds with state funds and local
development, became intensely involved in many of these measures,
particularly unemployment compensation and relief legislation.
Rather than doing the work individually and not accomplishing very
much, we found ourselves working on committees that were repre-
sentative of the groups that felt as we did--in favor of certain
of these measures. At that time Dr. Emily Huntington [1895-],
and Dorothy Williams [-] were members of the San Francisco
League and worked very closely with the League, bringing it in
touch with the work that they were doing in drafting state legis-
lation. Both Dr. Huntington and Dorothy Williams were on the

League committee that was studying measures which were being proposed for state adoption, so the League was continually in touch with what was happening and could help educate the electorate and could bring pressure for adoption for good programs.

Farley: Were they working for the government?

Eliel: Dr. Emily Huntington was working with the Social Security Board at that time. She was professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Economics Department and Dorothy Williams was an attorney--Assistant U.S. Attorney General, California, at one time--and also worked for the Fair Labor Standards Act. They were brilliant women who were assisting us, and that, I think, was one of the greatest assets of the Center in those days--that we had a group of brilliant women who were working with us.

Farley: Do you feel that you were more effective as an organization of women than you would have been as an organization of both men and women citizens?

Eliel: Yes, I do.

Farley: Why?

Eliel: Well, I felt, and I think it's probably true today, that men are more handicapped in the open expression of their political

beliefs because of the necessity of keeping their jobs and supporting their families as well as being under pressure from their employers to vote certain ways. If men were in the organization, they would be less likely to openly take the stands that the women have not been afraid to take as a women's organization.

Farley: Then very many women voted quite independently of their husbands?

Eliel: Yes.

Farley: What was the reaction of the men to their wives' political activities?

Eliel: I had a very liberal husband as far as letting me do what I wanted to do. (laughter) I can't speak for the other men. I imagine that some of the women did have some difficulty and had to watch their step, but on the whole the women that I worked with on the League board were very independent.

Farley: Could you tell us something more about the fellow-officers and board-members you were working with?

Eliel: Mrs. Edmund Brown [-] was First Vice-President and, as you know, is the wife of the ex-governor. She was my right-hand worker. She had a magnificent mind and thought very

clearly, and I depended upon her a great deal. Mrs. Lester Carter [-] also helped tremendously. Her enthusiasm and her knowledge of the membership were invaluable. I'd been living in Palo Alto and had moved up to San Francisco during the war years because of my husband's war job, and Mrs. Carter was very useful because she knew all of the membership and the general set-up of the San Francisco League. Mrs. Richard Laist [-] and Mrs. Arnold Kahn [-] were a great help in our Civil Service Campaign which was trying to standardize salaries and improve the Civil Service, not only in the state but in San Francisco. Mrs. Bernard Kelley [-] and Mrs. Harold Hacke [-] both did great work in voting procedures and getting out the vote. Mrs. J. Henry Mohr [-] did monumental work on the Library Committee and as a result of her active work she more than warranted her appointment by the Mayor on the Library Commission. Her traveling and study of Library procedures throughout the U.S. resulted in many reforms in San Francisco.

Farley: You seem to have a number of quite socially prominent people on your board. What role did they play as board-members?

Eliel: Well, I think almost any board if it is dependent for financing its organization in other ways than by membership dues, needs a certain amount of prestige in order to raise money. The public trusts and businessmen trust the organization if they know that certain people whom they respect are on the board. I think we

did have a number of that type of people on the San Francisco board.

Farley: Did this help your rather small numbers in the early days?

Eliel: I imagine it did. It probably helped to bring in members. When we spoke of enlarging our membership and when the National League asked us to enlarge our membership out into the districts, we always had trouble bringing in members of minority groups. I don't know quite why--whether we didn't select the right people to be the leaders or whether they were suspicious of us--I really don't know.

Farley: You were quite anxious to extend it to minority groups, I take it.

Eliel: Well, we were anxious to extend it to more of a cross-section of the city, let's say.

Farley: Did you feel then that your membership was composed mainly of women from the upper class? Women of considerable leisure?

Eliel: Yes. Yes, more leisure. Let's not use the word "upper class", (laughter) but people with enough money to be able to have some help at home so they could get away for their committee work and have baby-sitters.

Farley: Did you have children during your period of activity in the League?

Eliel: Yes. My sons were in their teens in the twenties, and my daughters were born in 1928 and 30.

Farley: How did this affect either your commitment to them or to the League?

Eliel: The children all turned out all right. (laughter). My philosophy of education: to give a broad field of experiences and opportunities for great freedom and good teachers necessitated that. The children came first.

Farley: I guess what I meant was--what arrangement did you make for their care?

Eliel: I always had enough money so that I could afford a full-time household worker. At one time I not only had a cook, but I had a French governess for the girls as well as a governess for the boys. Also, during my state presidency the office in Berkeley was in my home where the full-time secretary came every day.

Farley: Was the volunteering of one's home and personal resources typical?

Eliel: No. After I gave up the presidency, the League began to rent office space.

Farley: Which of the many positions that you held in the League-- either local, state, and national levels--did you find the most exciting and enjoyable?

Eliel: Most exciting were probably the four years when I was secretary of the National League of Women Voters, 1936-1941 . That was a long stretch of very hard work, including going East twice a year. But the caliber of the women on the national board was exciting, and we were very productive in what we did and the way we worked. I learned invaluable lessons from that experience.

Farley: Were many of them professional women?

Eliel: No, I don't think so. Except perhaps Mrs. Quincy Wright who was, I think, head of the Foreign Policy Association of Chicago at that time. Other than that there were women of stature like Belle Sherwin [-] from the Sherwin-Williams Paint Company family; Marguerite Wells from Minneapolis; Mrs. Robert Taft [1861-1943], wife of the Senator, who was Treasurer; Gertrude Ely of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; Katherine Fisher of Winnitka, Illinois, and many others, all leaders in their own communities.

Farley: That's quite a trip from the West Coast to the East. How did you manage? Did you have to finance yourselves?

Eliel: No, our traveling expenses were met by the League. Our hotel bills were paid, and if the League asked, we were supposed to stop off in various states and help to organize and survey the League field. I did a great deal of traveling for the League during those four years I was secretary.

Farley: Many of these women exerted considerable influence, I take it, in their own areas as public figures. How did you operate in that respect?

Eliel: Well, I don't know. You see, the average National League leader had been so active in the suffrage movement that a number of the women on the board, like Mrs. ^{Edna Gellhorn} ~~Gellhorn~~ of Missouri [1878-1970] and Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt [1859-1947], were well-known. I had become known as the state president of the California League...and I guess that's why I was selected as secretary of the National League.

Farley: When you expressed an opinion, say in your own state, what influence did that have?

Eliel: I must say that during the early days of the League of Women Voters in California, we didn't have any of the formal organization that the League has now. I recognize that it's absolutely necessary with a large number of Leagues to have definite study items, periods of consideration for legislative work,

and also a general consensus before the League can take a stand on measures and work for them in the Legislature. In the beginning days that wasn't necessary. We didn't have these tight rules and regulations, and we who were in the legislative field had to rely more or less on our own good judgment and what our board of directors thought--without polls of the general membership as they take now. So in those early days some very amusing things happened which never would happen nowadays. (laughter) I can remember when James Rolph [1869-1934] was first elected Governor [1931]. He introduced a bill or a series of bills--I don't remember which--that removed certain prominent jobs in the state from the Civil Service so that he could appoint his friends. The League immediately rose to the occasion and opposed these bills. When a newspaper reporter called me to find out what the League's reaction was to this legislation, I said, "They're nothing but 'spoils' bills." He immediately took up the word "spoils" and "bills," and he spread it on the front of his paper in four-inch type, as being (laughter) labeled that way by the League of Women Voters. That publicity had a great deal to do with the bill's defeat.

Farley: Do you feel you were well-covered by the press?

Eliel: I think we were covered as well as we deserved. We're really a small organization, but we were respected, so they called us up and asked for our opinion. We also had an amusing incident with

Governor Rolph. He appointed, when he first came in, Rheba Crawford Splivalo [1898-], who had no real training in the field of social welfare. Her father was an officer in the Salvation Army, and she had been an assistant, or was an assistant at the time, of Aimee Semple McPherson [1890-1944], the great evangelist in those days in Los Angeles. Other than that she was not equipped for the position. She became the bone of contention among all the social welfare organizations and workers in the state, and the League went to Sacramento to speak to the Governor about certain things that they disapproved of that she was doing. At the time of the interview in his office, he called her in and faced her with these accusations, whereupon she put her head down on his desk and began to cry very loudly and emotionally. The Governor rose from his chair, went over and patted her on the back and said, "There, there, dear." (laughter) We never forgot that. It was a charming little episode. Like the one when we went to see Governor F. F. Merriam [1865-1955]. Whether he respected women or not, we don't know yet, but when we went in, he put his feet up on the desk and sat there talking to us with his feet up. (laughter)

Farley: Had there been a lot of pressure prior to Mrs. Splivalo to appoint a woman to that position?

Eliel: I think there'd always been a woman in that position, as I remember it.

Farley: You were quite involved in furthering--along with your other programs--programs of particular interest to women, such as women's rights, the women's prisons at Tehachapi, and so on.

Eliel: I don't think that we were particularly interested in women's causes. We were terribly interested in unemployment compensation, in reform of the Civil Service, and other things of that kind. We worked very hard for the women's prison. That was a state measure, and Mrs. Ernest Wallace [-] as I remember it, was the League chairman in charge of seeing that that legislation got through. But I do not think we worked more for women's legislation than we did for general measures.

Farley: You worked very hard for an improved merit system in the Civil Service and, as I recall, one of the results of your victory in that area was that more women were appointed, although that hadn't been an explicit concern. Did you feel that perhaps at that time there was some stigma attached to being for what is now called "Women's Lib" or women's rights?

Eliel: No, we were more interested in seeing good administrative services inaugurated. We worked and supported what was called--statewide--the Industrial Welfare Commission. Mrs. Katherine Philips Edson [1870-1933] was appointed by Governor Hiram Johnson [1860-1945] and carried on for years in developing women's legislation, or legislation to protect women in employment. She was a League member.

We supported her ardently in all that legislation. Those weren't Lib days though. (laughter)

Farley: But it seems that you had a number of very independent and strong women in your number even though they may not have billed themselves as feminists.

Eliel: Oh yes, oh yes we did. Mrs. Edson was a rare human being, and she worked very closely with us. When she died, the League, among the organizations she was interested in, was a leader in establishing a redwood grove for her.

Farley: Mrs. Edson sounds like quite an interesting person.

Eliel: I really don't know a great deal about her preliminary experiences because she lived in southern California, but Governor Johnson was known for his liberal ideals and his fine appointments and she was certainly one of them. She always worked very closely with women's organizations and with the League and was indefatigable in protecting women's health and working conditions.

Farley: Did the San Francisco League dominate the State League in any way?

Eliel: Well, it did in a way, because it had the largest membership of the local Leagues and it had been in existence all during the

suffrage days from 1911 when it was established. The Center was known for its ability to secure prominent speakers of international as well as national fame. Los Angeles never had that background. It was established as a straight League and never had the prestige that the San Francisco Center had.

Farley: You mentioned that because of your research and your careful study about issues you were always well respected by government officials and the press. How were you viewed by other women and other women's organizations?

Eliel: The YWCA for years adopted without question the National League's legislative program. We set up a joint organization of the presidents of women's organizations some time during the forties. The presidents would meet if there was a common cause. On the whole though the League worked very independently and the measures it supported weren't always supported by the Federation of Women's Clubs or the American Association of University Women.

Farley: Did you find that most of your friends during your period of involvement were also League of Women Voters people?

Eliel: Yes, except for my social life with my husband.

Farley: Have these friendships that you formed through your work in the League been quite long-lasting ones?

Eliel: Yes, they have, and I still enjoy meeting all my old friends in League affairs. The position that I held in the League gave me a certain amount of prominence so that it led to later appointments in my life which have been very fruitful. I'm sure I was selected to the West Coast regional director of the Institute of International Education because of my work with the League and the California Committee for Children and Youth.

Farley: Because of the League's educational program for voters?

Eliel: Not necessarily, but probably because of my general knowledge and executive ability--I don't know which--I did have a great interest in the field of education and in international relations, of course. The League was very much interested in the United Nations.

Farley: Did you feel that the League furnished you with this knowledge or did you come as kind of a novice to public affairs? What was your major in school?

Eliel: My major was Public Health and Social Welfare and my M.A. was in the field of education. At the first national convention I ever attended of the League of Women Voters it was taking up the Reciprocal Trade Agreements, and I knew nothing whatsoever about them, or very little about the field of economics. I

think I even flunked Econ in college as I remember it. But I can remember on the Pullman going East, pouring over League material on trade agreements and free trade and tariffs, and I became a pretty good expert. Now that's typical of the League. You had to know your field, and you knew you were going to have to vote on it at the convention. The League gave you the material to become acquainted with the issues.

Farley: Who was in charge of arranging this material and printing what you were reading?

Eliel: Oh, it was all done at the national office with trained people. They would get professors in the colleges to write the material for them.

Farley: Do you think there was a strong effort to try and recruit women as experts?

Eliel: I don't think that there was any drive particularly motivated toward women. We got the best we could get on both sides of the question.

Farley: Were you involved in other organizations during your involvement in the League?

Eliel: Oh yes. I was on the women's board of the San Francisco Museum of Art, and then I was trustee of the San Francisco Museum of Art for, I think, ten years. That gave me an entirely different

slant on life and (laughter) I learned a lot about modern art that I never would have known otherwise. I was on the Governor's commission for the Youth Authority. Let's see, it was called the California Committee for Children and Youth and appointed by Governor Earl Warren [1891-] in 1945. I held that until 1952, and during that time I was chairman of the committee to study migrant youth--this was during the great migration of the Okies and the Arkies and many transient youths were coming here. We hired a researcher and published a report on transient youth in California during those years, and that was a tremendously interesting work. Then, when I became less active in the League, I became the San Francisco director in 1948 of the Great Books program in San Francisco; so that I have had a number of outside activities that have been very interesting and enlarged my vision and educational outlook on life. Also, during the Depression from 1931-35, I was on the Berkeley Board of Education and president of it.

Farley: Are there any people--men or women past or contemporary--that you regard as heroes or that you admire greatly?

Eliel: Oh, I don't know. I'd have to think about that. (laughter)

Farley: I have the impression that Eleanor Roosevelt [1884-1962], during the New Deal and the war particularly, set an example of public service for many women all over. Did you ever meet her?

Eliel: I met Eleanor Roosevelt through the League of Women Voters. She spoke at at least one of the conventions--I think it was the New York convention--and I admired her tremendously. I always admired Governor Hiram Johnson--although I was just a youngster when he was governor ~~really~~--for what he did in the way of liberalizing the state legislature. It had been in control of the Southern Pacific before he was elected governor, and he freed it from that control and put in a great many forward-looking programs. He was a great idol of mine during my younger years. And of the governors that came along--I guess there's hardly one that I hadn't known through my legislative work ~~work~~ with the League--Governor Warren stood out as what I would call the most forward-looking and the best administrator.

Farley: Thank you.